

## TEACHING LISTENING TO IMPROVE ORAL COMMUNICATION IN EFL INTERMEDIATE CLASSES: CASE STUDY OF TWO SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN COTONOU (BENIN)

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**Abstract:** In the first language acquisition process, children develop the listening skill before other skills. In addition, a human being who is not capable of listening cannot participate in a communication act appropriately. This study investigates the teaching of listening to improve oral communication. Its specific objectives are to determine EFL learners' difficulties in listening comprehension and to find out strategies used by EFL teachers to develop listening comprehension in their learners. To that effect, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of 23 EFL teachers and another one to 292 learners. The study revealed that difficulties encountered by the learners include the fact that they live in a multilingual environment that has the potential of bringing about linguistic interferences. The learners also experience difficulties decoding their teachers and native speakers and reported that their teachers never assess their listening skill. As far as strategies used by teachers are concerned, they encourage their learners to practice listening at home. They also teach their learners listening processing strategies such as bottom-up and top-down strategies. Finally, the teachers divide their listening lessons into three phases including pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening phases.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language; listening comprehension; secondary education; strategies; difficulties

**Résumé :** Dans le processus d'acquisition de la première langue, les enfants développent d'abord l'écoute avant les autres compétences. De plus, un être humain ne peut pas participer adéquatement à un acte de communication sans être en mesure d'écouter. La présente étude explore l'enseignement de l'écoute en vue d'améliorer la communication orale. Elle a pour objectifs spécifiques de déterminer les difficultés auxquels les apprenants de l'anglais langue étrangère (ALE) sont confrontés en matière de compréhension de l'écoute et les stratégies utilisées par les professeurs d'ALE pour amener leurs apprenants à développer la compréhension de l'écoute. À cet effet, un questionnaire a été administré à 23 professeurs d'ALE et un autre à 292 apprenants. L'étude a révélé que les difficultés auxquelles les apprenants

sont confrontés comprennent le fait qu'ils vivent dans un environnement multilingue qui est susceptible de créer des interférences linguistiques. Les apprenants ont également du mal à décoder leurs enseignants et les natifs et ils ont signalé que leurs enseignants n'évaluent pas leur compétence en écoute. En ce qui concerne les stratégies utilisées par les enseignants, ils encouragent leurs apprenants à pratiquer la compréhension de l'écoute en dehors de la classe. Ils enseignent également les stratégies de traitement de l'écoute telles que la stratégie descendante ou ascendante. Pour terminer, ils divisent leurs leçons d'écoute en trois phases à savoir la phase de pré-écoute, la phase d'écoute et la phase de post-écoute.

**Mots-clés :** anglais langue étrangère ; compréhension de l'écoute ; enseignement secondaire ; stratégies ; difficultés

## Introduction

Nowadays, English is considered as one of the most important languages in the world. It has unequivocally established its position as the *lingua franca*. Indeed, today, there is a growing need for everyone to have a good command of English and people whose first language is French are not excluded. The teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is one of the most important subjects in all the Beninese secondary schools though students are not able to practice English outside the classroom. Teachers have to use appropriate methods and techniques to lead the students to have a good command of English and speak it very fluently whatever the context. Despite the EFL teachers' efforts, it is a truism that most of the secondary school students are not able to communicate fluently in English. Indeed, language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing are part of communicative English.

The fact that Beninese students are not fluent in English means that listening and speaking skills are not successfully taught. Moreover, teachers often lack appropriate means to teach listening comprehension while it is a critical skill. Research has shown that "adults spend 40-50% of communication time listening" (Vandergrift, 1999, p. 169). This means listening is very important as it takes almost half of the communication time in a conversation and for that reason, it is not possible to communicate well if one cannot listen well. Despite this importance of the listening skill, its teaching is neglected by most EFL teachers and school administrators. Some schools are without electricity supply and listening materials are not always available. Even though the prescribed textbooks contain listening activities, there are no audiotapes or CDs that teachers can play during those activities. They often have to use their own voices.

This study aims to determine EFL learners' difficulties in listening comprehension and to find out strategies used by EFL teachers to develop listening comprehension in their learners. This research work will try to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the EFL learners' main difficulties in listening comprehension?
2. What are the strategies used by EFL teachers to develop listening comprehension in their learners?

This research work is limited to the case study of C.E.G. Zogbo and C.E.G. Ste Rita and focuses on intermediate classes (third and fourth forms) and EFL Teachers in charge of those classes in both secondary schools.

### *0.1. Literature review*

Listening has been defined as the ability to recognize and understand what other people say (Thomlinson, 1984; Hamonda, 2013). This ability includes understanding a speaker's utterances, including the grammar and vocabulary that go with the utterance. Morley (1972) stated that listening involves auditory discrimination, aural grammar, selecting necessary information, remembering it, and connecting it to the process between sound and form of meaning. Therefore, many processes occur simultaneously in a listening comprehension situation and for that reason, listening comprehension is a very complex activity. On his part, Bowen (1985) demonstrated that listening consists in understanding oral language. Students hear oral speech, divide it into sounds, classify them into lexical and syntactic units, and comprehend the message in a fraction of a second (Gilakjani, 2016). Listening is a process of receiving what the speaker says, making and showing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and answering, and creating meaning by participation, creativity, and empathy. Listening is a complex process of interpretation in which listeners match what they hear with what they already know (Rost, 2002; Gilakjani, 2016). This implies that previous knowledge plays an important role in comprehending a message heard. That is the reason why it is critical for teachers to provide a background on the message or text to be listened to by their students to facilitate the decoding and understanding of such a message.

Furthermore, there have been different definitions of the term "listening comprehension." Rost (2002), and Hamouda (2013), defined listening comprehension as an interactive process in which listeners are involved in constructing meaning. Listeners comprehend the oral input through sound discrimination, previous knowledge, grammatical structures, stress and intonation, and other linguistic or non-linguistic clues (Gilakjani, 2016).

Nadig (2013) defined listening comprehension as the various processes of understanding and making sense of spoken language. These involve knowing speech sounds, comprehending the meaning of individual words, and understanding the syntax of sentences (Gilakjani, 2016). However, it is not necessary to understand nor to decode individual words in a message to be able to understand the message on the whole.

Based on the above definition, listening comprehension is construed in this paper as the process of decoding and understanding a given message or text. After this clarification of the concept of listening comprehension, we now turn to the means and techniques that can be used to develop the listening skill.

Different means can be used in the classrooms, including the use of authentic materials and technology (Rixon, 1986; Rubin, 2007). The use of technology (the internet and computers) enables to make interesting materials available to students, including authentic materials such as songs, TV serials, movies, documentaries, videos (McBride, 2009; Rost, 2007). In terms of

techniques, the integrated teaching of the different language skills has been underscored. Teaching language skills in isolation does not do much service to the learners. The integration of the skills can make activities more meaningful, motivate learners, and create interesting contexts. Listening can be used to improve other skills such as reading or speaking skills at all levels and listening can gain from other skills such as reading and writing because through reading and writing, students learn new words that can be helpful in decoding and understanding messages during listening comprehension activities (Fotos, 2001; Krashen, 2006; Murphy, 1991; Snow, 2005; and Ak, 2012). The teaching of pronunciation can also help students to do better in listening comprehension in terms of decoding messages (Gilbert, 1995; Nunan and Miller, 1995).

All in all, the role of previous knowledge and technology in listening comprehension, the need to integrate the teaching of listening comprehension with other skills and pronunciation are noteworthy in the teaching of listening comprehension for the promotion of oral communication.

## ***0.2. Methods and procedures***

This study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the issue under investigation. It covers two public secondary schools in Cotonou and involves both EFL learners and teachers. Learners involved are those of the third and fourth forms. Twenty-three (23) teachers and 292 learners participated in the study. A questionnaire was administered to each group of respondents. The questionnaire was used as data collection instrument because it enables to collect a large amount of data in a short period of time and at a very low cost (Dörnyei, 2010). The learners' questionnaire was intended to collect data on the use of English by their teachers in the classroom, their opinions about listening comprehension, their ability to understand native speakers, the type of materials used by their teachers to teach listening comprehension, and difficulties experienced by the learners during listening comprehension lessons. The questionnaire administered to EFL teachers enabled to gather information on instructional language used in the classroom, whether they teach listening comprehension or not and mainly on strategies used to teach listening comprehension as well processing strategies taught to students. The questionnaire closes on the difficulties experienced by teachers in the teaching of listening comprehension. The data were analyzed in different ways. The Microsoft Excel software was used to analyze the quantitative data and to generate graphs and pie charts that better display such data. As for the qualitative data, the major themes contained in the statements made by the respondents were identified and illustrated.

## 1. Results

The findings from the students' questionnaire are first presented and those from the teachers' questionnaire follow them.

### 1.1 Findings from the Students' questionnaire

The first item is on the linguistic background of the students. Table 1 shows the number of languages spoken by the respondents.

**Table 1: Number of language(s) spoken by EFL Learners.**

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Number of languages spoken	One	28	90.41
	More than one	264	9.59

Table 1 shows that most of the EFL learners participating in the study are at least bilingual. This is all the more normal since most EFL learners in Benin has a national language as mother tongue and they also speak the official language of instruction in the country that is French. As for Table 2, it sheds light on variations in the ways teachers speak English.

**Table 2: Assessment of EFL Teachers' Speaking Skill**

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Teachers' speaking skill	Yes	5	1.71
	No	287	98.29

Table 2 reveals that EFL learners feel that their teachers do not speak English in the same way. To be more specific, some are proficient with a native-like proficiency and accent whereas others are less proficient and speak the language with some level of difficulty. Following the first two questions, the respondents were sounded out on the use of English outside of the classroom. Seventy-six point thirty-seven percent (76.37%) of the respondents stated that they do not use English outside the classroom while only 23.63 percent do. Benin is a French-speaking country and this response came with no surprise as most of the learners speak French or their mother tongue once they are outside of the classroom. This makes listening more difficult because any speaking situation always entails listening. The corollary of the fact that the respondents do not use English at home is that they have a hard time following their teachers when the latter speak in the classroom. Their responses to the question about their ability to understand their teachers' talk in the classroom are displayed in Table 3 which shows that 77.1 percent can understand their teachers only sometimes.

**Table 3: EFL Learners’ ability to understand their Teachers in the classroom**

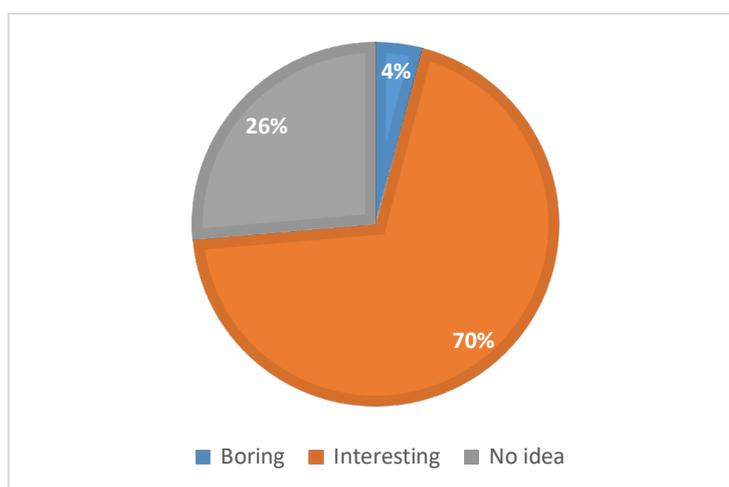
Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Ability to understand the teachers when they speak in the classroom	Yes	53	18.15
	Sometimes	225	77.05
	No	14	4.80

It follows from the data in Table 3 that most of the respondents are not in a position to listen to native speakers and understand what the latter are saying as shown in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: EFL Learners’ understanding of native speakers**

Item	Answer	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Understanding native speakers	Yes	19	6.51
	Sometimes	109	37.33
	No	164	56.16

Over half of the respondents stated that they do not understand native speakers at all when they speak. With the above information about the respondents’ ability to listen to English speakers, let us examine their opinions about their listening comprehension lessons as displayed in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: EFL Learners’ opinions about their listening comprehension lessons**

This figure shows that an overwhelming majority of students find their listening comprehension lessons interesting and only a few of them find those lessons boring. However, when asked if their teachers bring materials such audiotapes or video players in the classroom, an overwhelming majority stated that the teachers never bring such materials to the classroom as shown in Table 5. There

seems to be a contradiction between the responses shown here and the previous ones related the learners' opinions about their listening comprehension lessons. The issue is how the respondents can be so appreciative of listening comprehension lessons that are taught with the teachers' voices.

**Table 5: Use of technical equipment to teach listening comprehension**

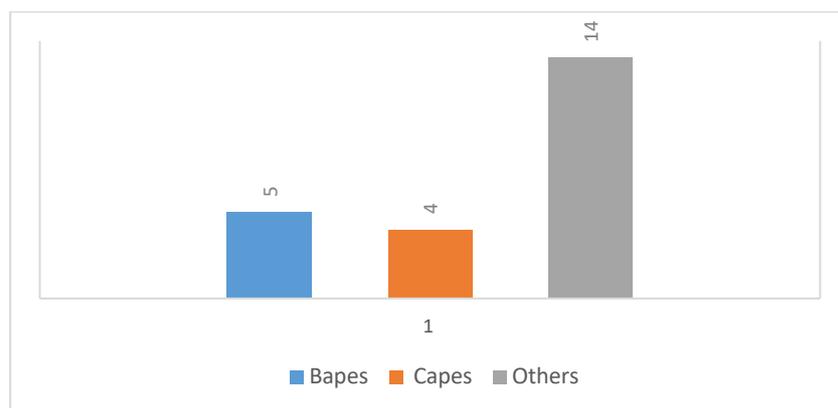
Item	Answer	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Teaching of listening comprehension lessons with technical equipment such as audiotapes or video players	Often	4	1.37
	Sometimes	12	4.11
	Never	276	94.52

Clearly, Table 6 shows that EFL teachers do not use any listening materials to teach listening comprehension. This fact seriously impedes the teaching of listening comprehension in those classes.

Apart from the above data, the findings also show that teachers do not encourage the respondents to watch English movies or listen to English songs or radio stations at home as indicated by 69.86 percent of the respondents. Only 30.14 percent stated that their teachers encourage them to do so. Given that Benin is a French-speaking country, if learners are not encouraged to listen to English outside of the classroom, then it will be difficult for them to perform well in listening comprehension because what they hear in the classroom will not be enough. It is also worthwhile to note that 78 percent of the respondents have never been submitted to an oral assessment on the part of their teachers. This implies that apart from the classroom discussions in which they participate, most of the respondents do not have the opportunity to engage in one-on-one conversations with anyone.

### ***1.2 Findings from the Teachers' Questionnaire***

The background data collected on the teachers revealed that most of the respondents have been teaching for more than five years. However, only 22 percent of them have ever traveled to and stayed in an English-speaking country. The fact that almost all the teachers have always been in their French-speaking country raises an issue regarding their ability to speak English adequately and even to listen to native speakers and be able to understand them properly. Furthermore, only nine of the respondents hold a professional qualification (CAPES or BAPES) to teach whereas 14 hold other degrees that are certainly academic, which means that most of the respondents are not qualified teachers as shown in Figure 2 below.

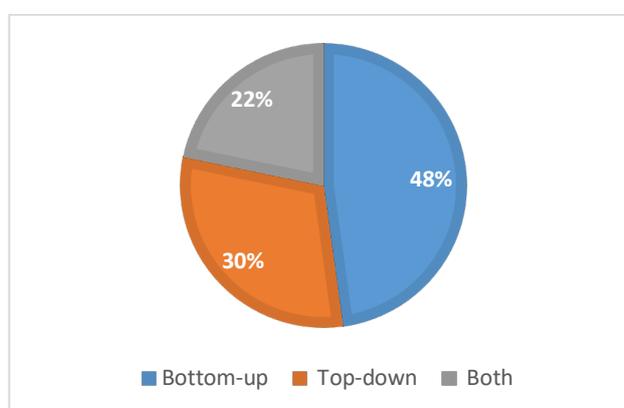


**Figure 2: EFL Teachers' professional qualifications**

As far as the language of instruction is concerned, the respondents' opinions are as follows:

only 8.70 percent of the respondents systematically use English when they are teaching their lessons while 91.30 percent stated that English is not the only language they use in the classroom. However, the level of use of other languages in the classroom is not known.

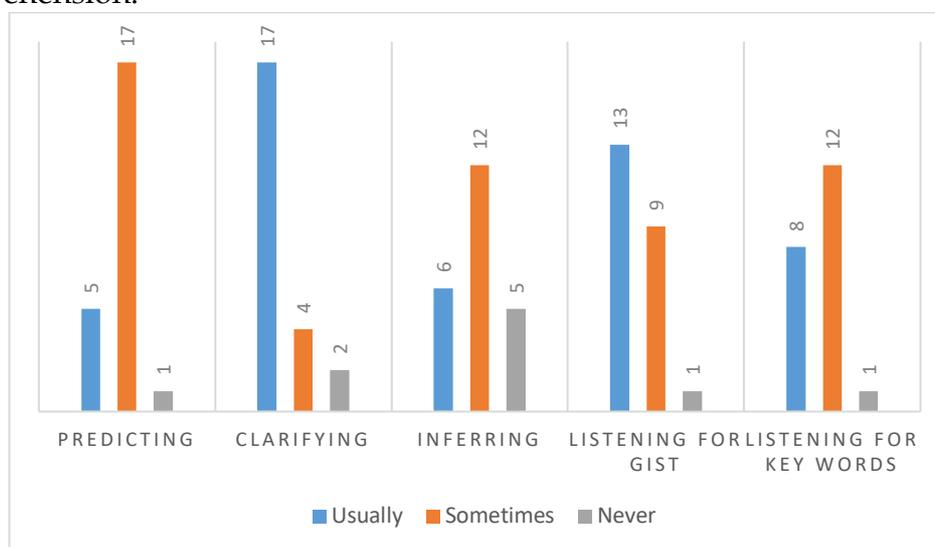
With regard to the teaching of listening comprehension, 82.61 percent of the respondents stated that they teach that skill to their learners whereas 17.39 percent stated they do not teach it. However, it is doubtful whether there is such a high level of teaching listening comprehension given that 94.52 percent of the student respondents indicated that their teachers do not bring technical equipment into the classroom for the teaching of listening comprehension. The teaching of listening comprehension follows a number of steps including pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. When asked how they teach their listening comprehension lessons, 73.91 percent of the respondents stated that they follow this three-step procedure while 26.09 percent do not. The problem with this latter group may be at the level of lesson planning. It is possible that they do not attach much importance to listening comprehension and believe that it just consists in presenting a text orally to students and asking a few questions about it. Their teaching of listening comprehension may lack systematicity.



**Figure 3: Processing Strategies fostered by EFL Teachers**

Figure 3 reveals that 48% of EFL teachers encourage their learners to use the Bottom-Up processing strategy while 30 percent encourage them to use the Top-Down processing strategy. Only 22 percent of them encourage their learners to use both processing strategies. The choice of the strategy depends on the activity at hand and the objectives of the lesson. Therefore, systematically encouraging one strategy as suggested by 78 percent of the respondents may not work all the time.

Teaching does not stop in the classroom. Given the complexity of listening comprehension, learners need to practice outside the classroom in order to improve their listening skills. Ninety-one point thirty percent (91.30%) of the respondents encourage their learners to practice listening comprehension through YouTube, TED Talks, BBC, and VOA outside the classroom. However, when asked if they give practical guidance on how their learners should practice listening comprehension outside the classroom, almost half of the respondents stated that they do not give any guidance. Without guidance, it will be difficult for the learners to practice that important skill. In addition, even with teachers who provide guidance, internet connectivity might be a handicap because not all the learners can afford a smartphone or to go to an internet café and pay for the use of a computer connected to the internet. Even when listening is taught in the classroom, students need to know some strategies in order to perform better and it is up to the teachers to teach them. Figure 4 presents the list of five strategies teachers are supposed to teach their learners for better practice of listening comprehension.



*Figure 4: Listening strategies students are encouraged to use*

The strategies investigated in Figure 4 are strategies that students should know to be able to listen to messages and answer their teachers' questions on those messages. Those strategies are also strategies that are used by listeners in everyday conversation. Figure 4 shows that those listening strategies are part and parcel of the teaching of listening skill. Only a negligible proportion of the respondents reported that they never teach and encourage their learners to use those strategies. Seventeen teachers out of 23 reported that they teach predicting

sometimes while twelve teach inferring sometimes. The number of teachers who usually teach those two strategies are five and six respectively. Thirteen teachers reported that they usually teach listening for gist whereas nine teachers teach it sometimes. Teachers teach listening comprehension to prepare their learners to be able to listen to everyday conversation. However, everyday conversation is full of colloquial language. Some of the respondents are aware of this and ensure that the listening materials they use contain colloquial language as reported by 56.52 percent of them. The other 43.48 percent reported that they avoid colloquial language.

Table 3: Students' exposure to Colloquial Language

Item	Answers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Do you use colloquial or less formal language during your class hour?	Yes	13	56.52
	No	10	43.48

As stated in the table 14, more than half of the EFL teachers admitted that they use colloquial or informal language during their class hour considering the already difficult teaching conditions in Beninese context, this could hamper the process of listening comprehension with learners.

## 2. Discussion of the Findings

### 2.1 EFL Learners' Main Difficulties in Listening Comprehension

The learners who participated in the study are confronted with a number of difficulties that are worth mentioning. First of all, they live in a multilingual environment where English is a foreign language, which means that they do not have the opportunity to speak it beyond the classroom. This situation potentially creates a lot of linguistic interferences given that the learners are handling many languages on a daily basis. Apart from the multilingual environment, 94.52 percent of the learners also reported that their teachers do not bring any technical equipment into the classroom for the teaching of listening comprehension. This implies that the teachers use their own voices as input for the teaching of listening comprehension. The fact that teachers do not bring any technical equipment means that the learners are reduced to hearing only their voice all the time. Therefore, it is not surprising that only 6.51 percent of the learners reported that they are in a position to hear native speakers when they speak.

Furthermore, the learners' difficulties are not limited to the challenges in decoding native speakers. In fact, 77.05 percent of the learners reported that they only hear their teachers sometimes when the latter speak English in the classroom in addition to 4.80 percent who reported that they do not hear at all. It is also necessary to point out that an overwhelming majority of the teachers who participated in the study reported that they had never stayed in an English-speaking country. All these facts imply that the input provided to the students is likely to be below standard quality. These findings confirm Gilakjani and

Sabouri's idea that the quality of the materials used as well as the accent of the speaker can pose a serious challenge to learners in a listening comprehension activity.

In addition to the foregoing, Nunan (2001) underscored that, in the classroom, learners can be involved in reciprocal or non-reciprocal listening. The reciprocal listening occurs in a typically speaking activity where the learners listen to a speaker and responds accordingly. However, for the reciprocal listening to proceed smoothly, learners must practice non-reciprocal listening profusely. The study reveals that 91.30 percent of the teachers encourage their learners to practice listening comprehension beyond the classroom through the internet even though they do not provide any guidance on how the learners should go about this practice. Nonetheless, it is not obvious that the learners truly practice listening outside the classroom inasmuch as most of them maintained that they cannot hear native speakers when they speak.

## ***2.2 Strategies Used by EFL Teachers to Develop Learners' Listening comprehension***

The background data collected indicate that only 39.12 percent of the EFL teachers who participated in the study hold a professional teaching qualification. Besides, just 22 percent of the teachers reported to have stayed in an English-speaking country. The lack of professional qualification and linguistic immersion among the teachers is likely to have negative bearings on their ability to teach English a foreign language in general and listening comprehension in particular.

With regard to the teaching of listening comprehension, the respondents reported the use of a number of strategies that are highlighted here. As stated earlier, the respondents encourage their learners to practice listening off-class. This is likely to help the learners improve their listening skill even if there is no certainty that they really have the opportunity to practice. The respondents also teach their learners the bottom-up and top-down listening processing strategies. Actually, 48 percent of the respondents reported that they teach the bottom-up processing strategy, 30 percent the top-down strategy and 22 percent teach both processing strategies. While the bottom-up processing strategy would be useful for beginners, the top-down or a combination of both processing strategies would work better for intermediate and advanced students who often have to listen to more complex messages. The bottom-up processing strategy is more adapted to beginners who often have limited knowledge of the language and the world in general. On the other hand, the top-down processing strategy which also falls within the cognitive strategies is more adapted to intermediate and advanced learners because it requires the use of previous knowledge and the context in which the listening takes place for understanding what is being said (Nunan, 2001; Bao, 2017; Bao and Guan, 2019).

Furthermore, the respondents explained the instructional procedures they follow in teaching listening comprehension. In fact, 73.91 percent of the respondents reported that they follow a three-stage instructional procedure to plan and teach their listening comprehension lessons: pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. The remaining 29.09 percent reported that they do

not follow that procedure. This three-stage instructional approach is very important in teaching listening comprehension, especially the first one and the last one. According to Vandergrift, pre-listening activities provide the teacher with the opportunity to prepare their students to “what they will hear and what they are expected to do” whereas post-listening activities enable students to evaluate the decisions made during the listening task through self-assessment and reflection (Vandergrift, 1999, pp. 172–173). In other words, the pre-listening phase enables the teacher to provide the background knowledge students need to have in order to understand the language while the post-listening phase provides students with the opportunity to reflect over what they have done in order to improve their performance in future activities.

### Conclusion

This study has been conducted to explore the teaching of listening comprehension and difficulties students experience with regard to that skill. It has shown that EFL learners who participated are multilingual and linguistic interferences are likely to occur. It has also been discovered that most EFL teachers do not bring any technical equipment to class for the teaching of listening and for that reason, students are limited to hearing their voice only. That is probably one of the reasons why the learners reported that it is difficult for them to hear native speakers when the latter speak. The learners equally reported that their teachers do not assess their listening skill.

Concerning the strategies used by EFL teachers to teach listening comprehension, the study revealed that most of them encourage their learners to practice listening outside the classroom. Those teachers also teach their learners the bottom-up and top-down listening processing strategies in order to improve their performance in listening. In terms of instruction, the teachers use the three-stage instructional procedure including pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening in planning their lessons. In addition, they teach their learners listening strategies such as predicting, clarifying, inferring, listening for gist, and listening for key words.

The above findings have some implications. As stated earlier, adults spend almost 50% of the time listening (Vandergrift, 1999). This means that the importance of the listening skill cannot be overemphasized. For that reason, it is of paramount importance to train teachers in the teaching of that skill and show them how it can be integrated into the teaching of other skills. School administrators should also be sensitized on the need to provide EFL teachers with the required equipment to teach listening comprehension. For further research, deeper investigation needs to be carried out in the field to see if what the teachers reported during the investigation is practiced in terms of lesson planning and implementation.

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